

CHRISTMAS!



Greeting, Happiness, and Joy to All.

A Discourse upon the Origin and History of the Day.

How the Festival was Anciently Observed, and How it is now Observed.

Legends, Sports, Music, Games, Feasting, Gifts.

Christianity's Natal Day the Grandest Day of the Year.

Merry-makings in the Various Countries Throughout the World.

Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc. Etc.

Kind reader, to day, anticipating a few brief hours, we bid you, thrice bid you, a "Merry Christmas." To-night, the ringing of bells, the shouting of youths, the din of merriment, the shouting of youths, the din of merriment, the shouting of youths, the din of merriment...

Is the Date Correct? Though the question whether the 25th of December is the true Christmas Day has been practically settled by the observance of the festival in the present century, still the subject is at times mooted, and arguments advanced in favor of other days, which, to say the very least, have the coloring of plausibility. It was anciently observed by some Churches in April, May, and other months, as well as December, but it has now for a long time been restricted by every Christian denomination to the latter month, and we presume the custom will never again be found to vary. Still, it may not be unprofitable to glance at the authorities which dwell upon this subject. When we do so, we not only find that all the arguments concerning the true date are based upon mere tradition, but they are confused and contradictory to a perplexing degree. At the earliest period to which we can trace the observance of Christmas as a professedly Christian festival, we find that some of the Churches celebrated it on the 1st and others on the 6th of January. Others, again, made it coincide with the Jewish Passover, by fixing it on the 29th of March; while by others the Feast of Tabernacles, which occurs on the 29th of September, was the favored season of the year. But some time before the reign of Constantine, in the fourth century, the New Year season irrevocably fixed its claims to this additional rejoicing. Even then, however, there was a difference in the practice of the Eastern and Western Churches. By the former the 6th of January was observed, and by the latter the 25th of December. The Western Church was finally triumphant, the date being fixed by a

mandate of Julius I, who was the head of the Roman See from A. D. 337 to 352. We are informed by St. Chrysostom, who died in the early part of the fifth century, that Pope Julius, being solicited by St. Cyril, of Jerusalem, so to do, caused inquiries to be made into the matter, and authoritatively decided that the most authentic traditions were in favor of the 25th of December.

History of the Festival. Having received the countenance of the Church, and being based on customs which were revered by the common people, Christmas continued down to the Reformation to be celebrated throughout the Christian world with great rejoicing. When the Protestant sects sprang into existence, this great festival, in common with many others on the Roman calendar, retained its place among the customs of the Lutheran and Anglican Churches; but by the adherents of Calvin it was rejected in toto, as without any warrant in Scripture. It was to the prevalence of this spirit among the Puritan settlers of New England that we owe the origin of our national festival of Thanksgiving. As Scotland was the country in which the Calvinistic doctrines became most prevalent, it was there that the clergy made the most determined efforts to do away with the observance of the obnoxious festival. The result of this course is the absence, even at the present day, of anything in the way of festivity on Christmas, except in the Highlands and the county of Forfar. But even in the Calvinistic Lowlands the tendency to rejoicing at the close of the year is so irrepressible that New Year's Day and the preceding evening, known as Hogmanay, are seasons of general jollification. In this country, while Christmas was formerly regarded by the Presbyterians with as much aversion as it is by those of their belief in the Old World, it has at last come to be observed by them generally, but merely as a season of festivity, without partaking of any sanctioned religious character.

The Festivities. In this country, and, indeed, throughout the world, the Christmas festivities may be said to commence with the evening of December 24. But according to the weight of the ecclesiastical authorities, the festival should begin on the 10th day of the month, which is designated in the calendar as O. Sapientia, from the name of an anthem sung during Advent. The proper termination of the festivities is the 1st of February, or the eve before the Purification of the Virgin--Candlemas Day--by which time, in accordance with the canons of the Church, all the holiday decorations of places of worship should be removed. In England, however, the festivities continue at the present day scarcely a fortnight, ending with Twelfth Day; while in this country it is but seldom that they last beyond the commencement of the New Year. Considering that Christmas is preeminently a Christian festival, it would seem strange that many of the customs peculiar to the day are to be traced back to heathenish sources for their origin. When the different European nations were first converted to Christianity, it was found that the rites peculiar to their former faith had taken such a hold upon the popular heart that it was almost impossible to prevent their continued observance. The early missionaries, therefore, made the best of this circumstance by engrafting on the ancient ceremonies and superstitions of their converts the principles of the new faith which they had accepted, thus rendering the transition less sudden and less obnoxious. This was particularly the case with respect to Christmas in Great Britain, from which country we have borrowed nearly all of our own methods of observing it. The origin of the principal ceremonies was the Saturnalia of the Romans--The season chosen for this grand merry-making was the time of the winter solstice, on the 21st of December, when the days, having arrived at the period of their shortest duration, began to lengthen, thus heralding the approach of spring and summer, which was regarded as a fit subject for rejoicing. The Roman Saturnalia was characterized by universal license and jollity. The relation of master and slave, for the time being, was completely severed; the former frequently attending upon the latter as servants. The houses were made gay with evergreens, and games and presents were the staple occupations of the old and young of all classes. Among the ruler nations of the North of Europe there was a similar festival, at the same period of the year, characterized in this case by the sacrifice of men and cattle, the hanging up of the sacred mistletoe, and the universal kindling of fires, indoors and out. From the last of these is derived the Yule Log of "Merrie Old England." It is also said that the ancient Persians, between whom and the Druids of Western Europe there is supposed to have been an intimate relation, were accustomed to kindle fires on an extensive scale at the same period of the year. At different times, to the peculiarities of the Saturnalia were added the weird rites of the Druids and the grim observances of the Saxon mythology; and from this odd mingling of Pagan ceremonial sprang the Christmas festivities of our forefathers.

Christmas Greens. From time immemorial it has been the habit of all Christian peoples to decorate their dwellings and places of worship during the

continuance of the festival. For this purpose--so far as the dwellings were concerned, while use was made of all species of evergreens--the mistletoe was chiefly regarded in former ages. This parasitical plant was held in great veneration by the ancient Druids, especially when it was found clinging to the oak, which was supposed to be regarded with peculiar favor by their god "Tutanes," who was identical with the "Baal," or Sun, of the Phœnicians. It was in his honor that the great festival of the winter solstice, corresponding to the Saturnalia of the Romans, was celebrated. On this occasion the ancient Britons would sally forth, with all the paraphernalia of rejoicing, the Druids or priests at their head, to gather the mysterious plant. On reaching the oak, two white bulls were first secured to it, and then the chief Druid, arrayed in robes of white, to typify his purity, ascended the tree, and with a golden knife severed the sacred plant, which was caught in falling in the robe of another priest. The bulls, and in some instances human victims as well, were then sacrificed; after which the plants thus gathered were divided among the people, and by them hung up in sprays over the entrances to their dwellings. Not only was the plant considered to possess the power to propitiate the sylvan deities during the season of frost and snow, but it was held to impart a healing influence to all who thus revered it. As might naturally be expected, there was a strong opposition to introducing it into the Christian churches, and it is believed that it was but seldom used at any time, except through the ignorance of the sextons. This, however, did not prevent it from entering into the decoration of private houses, and as long as it could be easily obtained it was extensively used for that purpose.

One of the most enticing games of Christmas Eve is connected with this plant. A branch of it is suspended from the wall or ceiling, and when one of the gentler sex passes under it, either purposely or by accident, she incurs the penalty of being kissed by any one of the other sex who so chooses. If she be not kissed, it is the supposition that she will remain single during the coming year. While it had been customary to employ in the decoration of the churches nearly all the seasonable varieties of evergreen--the mistletoe being always excluded--the plants that are held in highest favor in England for this purpose are the holly, bay, rosemary, and laurel. The ivy is also used, but from its associations with Bacchus and the infernal orgies celebrated in his honor, it is generally considered undesirable. It is still the custom, however, at the two great English universities to deck the windows of the college chapels with this plant. Cypress, also, is sometimes excluded on account of its funeral associations. In this country, where many of the more appropriate evergreens are but scantily produced, the cedar, box, and pine are employed, from the necessities of the case. In the decoration of houses every available shoot of green is pressed into service, although holly and ivy have usually the preference. In Oxfordshire, England, there was a peculiar penalty attached to the neglect of this ceremony. The maid-servant would request the man to furnish a supply of ivy for decorating the house; and if for any reason he did not comply, a pair of his unmentionables were inevitably nailed up over the gateway.

Feasting on Fat Things. The distinguishing feature of Christmas as a season of festivity is the universality with which the custom of feasting on that day is observed. Not only here in this country, but all over the world, Christmas Day is a nomenclature without a Christmas board. The other peculiarities of the festival have arisen and increased their number through the lapse of years--some have become obsolete, while others have come into vogue; but from the very beginning the custom of making it a feast in the true sense of the word--a ministration in chief to the stomach--has uninterruptedly prevailed. Every lay which has been composed in its praise contains some allusion to the "groaning table," or, descending to specifics, advances the claims of plum-pudding, turkey, goose, or hot punch. In fact, to the younger people it is no more than an opportunity afforded to glut themselves to their hearts' content with sugar-plums and bon-bons--a season when parents are liberal in the giving of good things and chary of caution in their use. The "hung stocking" tells the whole tale, proves the truth of what has already been said, and obviates any necessity for further comment.

Stevenson, in his "Twelve Months," thus describes a Christmas in 1661:--"Now, capons and hens, besides turkeys, geese, ducks, with beef and mutton, must all die; for in twelve days a multitude of people will not be fed with a little. Now plums and spice, sugar and honey, square it among pies and broth. Now a journeyman cares not a rush for his master, though he begs his plum porridge all the twelve days. And if the cook do not lack wit, he will sweetly lick his fingers." In ancient times it was the boar's head that held the first rank among the Christmas dishes of England. This dish appears to have been popular at a very early period. Holinshed, in speaking of the coronation of the Prince of Wales in 1170, says that King Henry II "served his son at the table as

sewer, bringing up the Boar's Head, with trumpets before it, according to the manner."

The ceremony of "Bringing in the Boar's Head" in these early days was attended with great pomp and ceremony. It was the first and foremost dish upon the Christmas table of the feudal chieftains, and was served in a manner strictly in accordance with the boisterous customs of the day.

As the "sewer" bore it to the table he sang thus:-- "Caput Apri deferro Reddens laudes domino. The Boar's head in hand bring I, With garlands gay and rosemary, I pray you all sygne merrily, Qui estis in convivio.

"The Boar's Head, I understand, Is the chief service in this land; Loke wherever it be found, Serve it cum Cantico.

"Be gladde, lords; both more and lasse, For this hath ordayned our stewarde, To chere you all this Christmasse, The Boar's Head will mustarde.

Caput Apri deferro Reddens laudes domino."

The dish next in regard to the boar's head in ancient times was the peasecock, which was served up in rare and magnificent style. After being prepared the lady-guest of noblest birth or most bewitching beauty was selected to bear this royal dish into the hall; and following her, to the sound of music, came the rest of the dames, in the order of their rank.

On such occasions the gallant knights would swear over the dish to engage in the succor of such gentle beings as they might find in distress, no matter what peril attended the enterprise. And sometimes there was then and there a tournament, the victor in which was permitted further to display his skill in the cutting up of small beasts.

Third in order of rank, perhaps--but first in modern estimation--comes the Christmas pudding, a dish of quite modern origin, although it had its progenitor in the plum-porridge of ancient days. This last was so highly esteemed that it was always served with the first course. Says Addison, in the Tatler, "No man of the most rigid virtues gives offense by excess in plum-pudding or plum-porridge."

Now we reach the Christmas pies, indispensable accompaniments of every Christmas board.

As early as 1596 Christmas pies were popular under the title of "mutton pies." At a later period meat-tongue took the place of the mutton, the remaining ingredients being nearly the same as at present. So highly esteemed at one time were these Christmas pies, that a watch was always set upon them to forestall the depredations of thieves. The proper time to commence eating them, according to old Dr. Parr, was O. Sapientia, or the 16th of December. Having so informed an inquisitive female, the Doctor added:--"But please to say Christmas pie, not mince pie; mince pie is puritanical." The Puritans, indeed, were bitter foes of anything that savored of Christmas superstition, and to their prejudices we are indebted for the following amusing stanza:--

"All plums the Prophet's sons deny, And spice-breads are too hot; Treason's in a December pie, And death within the pot."

The famous legend of "Little Johnny Horner" can properly be introduced in this connection. Here we have it:--

"Said John Horner, 'Sedab in a corner, Edena a Christmas pie, Inset in his thumb, Zetrich a plum, Ereclamans, 'quid smart puer am I.' In our days the boar's head, the peasecock, and other dishes anciently esteemed, have given place to the turkey, the goose, and the chicken. The first of these is now the essential dish, and ever occupies the position of honor on the table. What an amusing calculation it would be for some enterprising statistician to add up the countless thousands of these doomed birds which are annually slaughtered just at this season!

The Music. Another distinguishing feature of the "Merry Christmas" time is its music. In England there is a class of musicians who are termed "Christmas Waits," although it is not known whether the word originally denoted the music, the performers, or the instruments upon which they played. As early as the year 1400 a company of "waits" was established at Exeter, concerning whom Rymer gives a long account, commencing as follows:--

"A wayte, that nightly from Michelmas to Shreve Thursdays pipe the waiche within this courte fower times; in the somere nyghtes by lynes, and make the bon gayte at every chamber-dore and ovyer, as well for feare of pyckeres and pillers. He eateth in the halle with mynstrilles, and taketh the iverye (allowaunce) at nyghte a lorde, a galone of ale, etc."

From this account it would appear that, in the time of Edward II, the "waits" were pages of the court; but in later days they were merely minstrels, whose strains were heard only at Christmas time in England, and in Scotland--Christmas being tabooed--at New Year. In London, at the present time, they perambulate the streets at night for two or three weeks before Christmas, performing the popular airs of the day on various wind instruments. Their labors cease on Christmas Eve, and soon after they call upon the inhabitants for their contributions.

The singing of Christmas carols is another custom which has long prevailed in England. The Christmas carol is as old as the festival itself, and in the primitive days of the Church it was customary for the bishop, surrounded by his clergy, to take part in this simple and beautiful ceremony. In those times the carol

was exclusively a religious song, but it has become so secularized that but little of the religious element now remains. We subjoin a few stanzas from one of the most touching of these Christmas ballads:--

"And all the bells on earth shall ring On Christmas day, on Christmas day; And all the bells on earth shall ring On Christmas day in the morning.

"And all the angels in heaven shall sing On Christmas day, on Christmas day; And all the angels in heaven shall sing On Christmas day in the morning.

"Then let us all rejoice again On Christmas day, on Christmas day; Then let us all rejoice again On Christmas day in the morning."

In this country the singing of Christmas carols has never been popularly adopted.

Sports and Festivities. With years always comes sedateness. This holds true not only in regard to the life of a man, but also in regard to the life of a custom.

In bygone ages, as has already been remarked the festival of Christmas was observed in noise and clamor, and while, sooth to say, it is kept even in this present age in a manner rather unquiet, yet, as it has grown old, its celebration is not now attended with any approach to that boisterousness which marked it centuries ago. Nevertheless, Christmas sports make up much of the attractiveness of the time. In the days of yore the "Yule Log" was the grand culmination of the sports of Christmas Eve. The custom is still retained, in some sections of England, although it is sadly shorn of the pomp and ceremony which formerly attended it. The festival of the winter solstice, as celebrated by the ancient Goths and Saxons, was termed Jul or Yule, by the latter of which terms Christmas is still known in the Scottish dialect. The term is most probably derived from the Gothic word jol or hul, from which is derived the English "wheel," and which has the same significance. Jul, or Yule, is therefore supposed to signify the turning-point of the year--a supposition which is confirmed by the fact that in the old clog almanacs the Yule-tide is designated by the device of a wheel.

The ceremony of bringing in the Yule Log was conducted in the following manner:--The party repaired to the woods where the log lay, and having placed themselves in the harness, dragged it in triumph to the hall, each wayfarer raising his hat as it passed. Arriving there, they were greeted by the minstrels with a song, of which the following, supposed to belong to the period of Henry VI, is a fair specimen:--

"Welcome be thou, heavenly King, Welcome born on this morning, Welcome for whom we shall sing, Welcome Yule!"

"Welcome be ye, good New Year, Welcome Twelfth-day, both in fere Welcome saints, loved and dear, Welcome Yule!"

The log was then rolled upon the ample hearth and ignited with a coal from the remnant of the Yule Log of the preceding year. This done, a candle of monstrous size was lighted, and then the Christmas party made themselves merry with music and wassail.

"Kissing under the Mistletoe" was another favorite game of Christmas Eve in olden times, while still another was the "Procession of Mummies," styled guisers or guisers in Scotland, a ceremony which is still kept up in some sections of England. The term "mummer," which is synonymous with "masquer," comes from the Danish mumme, or the Dutch monne. The custom was probably derived from the Roman Saturnalia, of which masquerading was a favorite feature. The early Christians, on New Year's day, were accustomed to run about the streets en masque, in ridicule of the custom of their Pagan neighbors. From these practices it is supposed sprang the "mystery-plays," or "miracle plays," which were for many centuries a favorite amusement of all the European nations.

The mumming ceremonies of Christmas Eve were in many respects similar to these popular "mysteries," although the religious element, which was prominent in the latter, was almost entirely wanting in the former. The persons engaging in them would array themselves in the most outlandish and fantastic costumes, combining all the oddities of men and brutes, and then make the round of the principal houses within their reach, to the intense delight of old and young. The ceremony was not strictly confined to the Christmas season in old times, although it is at present, wherever practised in England. At Tenby, in South Wales, it is kept up for three weeks, every house in the town being visited. In Scotland, mumming, or guising, is performed at New Year, as are all the other festivities of the winter solstice.

The "Lord of Misrule" now takes his place as next on the list of Christmas sports of the days of our ancestors. This functionary, in a word, was the master of the Christmas revels. We have the following account of the custom by Stow:--"In the feast of Christmas there was in the king's house, whosoever he lodged, a 'Lord of Misrule,' or Master of Merry Sports, and the like had ye in the house of every nobleman of honor or good worship, were he spiritual or temporal. The Mayor of London, and either of the Sheriffs, had their several Lords of Misrule, ever contending, without quarrel or offense, who should make the rarest pastime to delight the beholders. These lords beginning their rule at Allhallond Eve, continued the same till the morrow after

the Feast of the Purification, commonly called Candlemas Day, in which space there were fine and subtle disguisings, masks, and mummeries, with playing at cards for counters, mayles, and points in every house, more for pastimes than for game."

In the University of Cambridge this functionary, regularly elected from among the Masters of Art, was termed Imperator, or Profectus Ludorum, and his duties were not only to interperend the diversions of Christmas, but of the annual representations of the Latin plays by the students as well. A similar custom prevailed at Oxford. In the Inns of Court in London the Lord of Misrule reigned in great splendor, being surrounded by all the paraphernalia of royalty, including a lord-keeper and treasurer, a guard of honor, and two chaplains, who regularly preached before him in the Temple Church on Sunday. His sovereignty terminated on Twelfth Day. In 1636, this mock-royal personage expended £2000 out of his own pocket, and in return received the honor of knighthood at the hands of Charles I. As an illustration of the outrageous license enjoyed by these functionaries, we subjoin an extract from the "Articles" by which the Right Worshipful Richard Evelyn, Esq., constituted Owen Flood, his trumpeter, the "Lord of Misrule of all good orders during the twelve days:--

"I give free leave to the said Owen Flood to command all and every person or persons whatsoever, as well servants as others, to be at his command whosoever he shall sound his trumpet or make, and to do him good service, as though I were present myself, at their peril. I give full power and authority to his lordship to break up all locks, bolts, bars, doors, and latches, and to fling up all doors out of hinges to come at those who presume to disobey his lordship's commands. God save the King!"

The Lord of Misrule commenced his reign by absolving all his subjects from their wisdom, commanding them to retain just enough sense to know how to conduct themselves like fools. In Scotland, previous to the Reformation, a functionary entitled the "Abbot of Unreason" was elected by the monasteries to superintend the Christmas festivities. In France, likewise, they had an Abbas Sultorum, or "Pope of Fools," of a similar character. The Scottish Parliament abolished the custom by statute in 1555. As might have been expected, the old Puritans were bitterly opposed to these practices, and denounced them in unmeasured terms, as relics of the "Roman Saturnalia and Bacchanalian festivals, which should cause all pious Christians eternally to abominate them."

From time out of mind, even to our present day, has descended the sport called "Snapdragon." Both in England and America it is one of the favorite games of Christmas.

The operation is very simple, although it requires a considerable amount of nerve and rapidity of motion. A quantity of plums or raisins are deposited in a large shallow bowl, and over these is poured brandy, or some other liquor, which is then ignited. The bystanders then plunge their hands into this mimic lake of fire and draw forth, if they can, a plum.

It is quaintly sung in the following verses: "Here he comes with flaming bowl, Don't be mean to take his toll, Snip! Snap! Dragon!" "Take care you don't take too much, Be not greedy in your clutch, Snip! Snap! Dragon!" "With his blue and lapping tongue Many of you will be stung, Snip! Snap! Dragon!" "For he snaps at all that comes, Snatching at his feast of plums, Snip! Snap! Dragon!"

Among the minor sports in vogue at Christmas time may be mentioned "Blind Man's Buff" and the game of "Forfeits," both of which are so well known as to require no particular notice. In addition to these there are countless others--some played here, some there--each locality having its own particular one, the best and most detailed enumeration of which would not only, of necessity, prove incomplete, but run to no one knows whither.

Old Notions and Superstitions. No other season in the year--no other festival in the calendar--is accompanied by so many singular fancies and actual superstitions as Christmas. Many of these have an origin anterior even to the discovery of our continent; others again have sprung into existence in days comparatively recent. Human nature is the same always and everywhere, so that not only the people of the Old World, but the people of the New, now retain, and mayhap believe in, many of these superstitions. Among them, perhaps one of the most ancient and singular is that concerning the "crowing of the cock." It was believed of yore that this bird, which of course is silent during the hours of the night, crowed from the setting of the sun on Christmas Eve to its rising on Christmas morn. Shakespeare has seized upon this popular tradition, and turned it to good advantage in one of the ghost scenes in Hamlet. "Marcellus" reminds his companions that the ghost "faded on the crowing of the cock," and then continues in the following beautiful strain:--

"Some say, that ever 'gainst that season comes, Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated, This bird of dawn singeth all night long, And then, they say, no spirit-steps abroad; The nights are wholesome; then no planet strikes; No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm, So hallow'd and so gracious is the time."

In old times there was a prejudice among the people of Scotland against "upbraiding on Christmas Day." The Calvinistic preachers, overflowing with anti-Christmas prejudices, took especial pains to rid their flocks of this idea. Their efforts in that direction are thus